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April 11, 1989

The ExComm as Big Con

Consider the Executive Committee of the National Security Council as largely a consensus-building exercise, not a genuine search for policy.

--Only the President, RFK and O'Donnell knew the place was wired. Contrary to Schell on Nixon, this didn't mean the President was stripping himself of his own privacy, or depriving himself of "wild, crazy ideas" (see review in Times Book Review); the others didn't know, and he didn't have to rein himself in (any more than Nixon did) because he didn't expect them to find out; only he would control the use of the transcripts, if any. (This expectation was fulfilled; the secret didn't get out for 25 years).

--The value of the transcripts--compared to earlier versions by participants--shows what the Nixon tapes on national security would be worth. (We don't even have insider accounts of those sessions comparable to Schlesinger and Sorensen).

--Big Con: a number of people involved are in the know, and are coordinating a pretense, a hoax, while one or more are not in the know--and cannot imagine that they confronting a conspiracy of silence and deception, coordinated behavior, apparently spontaneous.

--All government at this level has something of that character, i.e., every "big" meeting--almost by definition, a group in which there are different levels and types of clearances among the people present.

--But that is one reason real exploration and decision-making is almost never done in big meetings. By JFK least of all. Contrary to an impression, he did not learn otherwise from Cuba I--nor should he have. He learned from Neustadt to avoid all big meetings and committees, and did this.

--So why this time? (Why never again--did he?) There was less time than usual for fooling around with people whose advice was not wanted--except to get them aboard.

--Why was Dillon there? Republican...hawk...Secretary of the Treasury! The President, and McNamara as well, disagreed with almost every one of his opinions, from start to finish...as could be predicted. They hadn't filled him in before...he apparently was not involved either in Cuba I or Mongoose, even though he had been involved in planning for Cuba I under Eisenhower, in State. (And he strongly blamed JFK for failure of Cuba I, refusal to give air cover!) No one had told him of the new strategic estimates: Nitze had to give him the word during the crisis. The only perceptible

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value of having him there was that he was induced--by RFK--to change his position from immediate airstrike to blockade.

My hypothesis here is that that is precisely why he was there (and, and for him to understand that JFK's own "shift" was likewise induced by a group consensus in this direction): and indeed, that this "education" of Douglas Dillon was a major reason for the ExComm exercise.

--Could this apply to McCone, too? He was already suspected of leaking to his fellow Republican Keating. To have him present during the meeting was hard to avoid--a reason for avoiding meetings for real discussion, as would be normal!

--Notice the presence of people at the meeting that could not be told key aspects of what was being done or considered: as, the instructions for RFK on October 27 (which seem to have been modified by a still smaller group, perhaps just the President: again, normal). Most members were never told even afterward what he had discussed; and almost none, what the President discussed with Rusk.

Thus, even on this record, the ExComm had aspects of a Big Con--misleading key figures about the history of the episode forever afterward, distorting any "lessons" they might draw about it (as the President, and others mainly in the know, would realize. Recall Bundy's skepticism about the value of my proposed lesson-learning project in 1964--justified, but exaggerated--and his refusal to cooperate.

--But the Kennedy School seminars have, too, an aspect of Big Con. Not only did Blight fail to imagine, in designing the project, that individuals might intentionally and knowingly conceal and mislead; he imagined still less that they might concert in this--not by explicit agreement, but by maintaining a joint silence on certain matters that they had practiced at the time and for a quarter of a century afterwards.

--Specifically, none has ever commented on what each and all of them have kept silent about that whole time: that the position for which Stevenson was singled out to be denounced for--by the President, almost surely, for the ultimate condemnation: appeaser, seeker of a Munich, weak, womanly--was (except for the matter of timing of the proposal) a position held by the President himself, repeatedly brought up almost alone at the climax of the crisis! (The Big Con aspect of the ExComm almost fell apart at this point; the President was failing to generate consensus for his own clear preference. That might have made it too dangerous and difficult for him to pursue his preference from the beginning, to back out from his threats of attack with a trade. Thus see the fear and near-dispair of those who wanted to avoid attack, as they saw him "pressured" toward an attack. This is a clear risk in big meetings, which is why they are usually avoided; yet normally, the President's is the only vote that counts, the others usually fall

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in line anyway, and he can always terminate the meeting, without showing his hand if he wants. Under the pressure of events, this process was getting out of hand. Hence, perhaps, the President's desperate effort at an ultimatum, a last, small chance to achieve a win, without backing down and without attacking.

All still protect him, and the cleanness of their victory--hiding how close they came to a "shameful defeat," wrought by their leader--by describing the open trade as "inconceivable," knowing this to be untrue.

--Note the episode in Allison, in 1963, Vietnam, when JFK describes the "inner circle", and McG comments on consensus-building. Also, Berman and McG's description of July, 1965. (Does Janis really allow for this purpose of meetings? Or, the general tendency to follow the President?)

--Key bit of evidence in O'Donnell: JFK tells RFK--on Thursday? --that what he wants is for RFK to build a consensus for blockade: which he does, with his Pearl Harbor argument. (No commentator has picked this up, and mentioned the possibility that the President was behind RFK's advocacy).

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 If the President's threat of attack on Cuba was a bluff, it too had the character of a Big Con--though those in the know might have been very few (McNamara, Sorensen, RFK, McG, ...Rusk? O'Donnell?)

Yet the President could have been pushed over the threshold into a non-nuclear attack: if he failed to get a working consensus against this, and if various circumstances arose.

Big question: Could he have been pushed even further, across the threshold of tactical nuclear operations; or beyond that, strategic operations?

Perhaps what Bundy is saying to me is that he believes the answer to this last question is No. But is he right?

He probably would apply this to LBJ, too; perhaps Carter. But is this true for Eisenhower or Nixon? I think almost surely not. Reagan? Ford? Bush? I doubt it.

Moreover, the fact that these later Presidents came to power is in part due to the decision by JFK and LBJ never to challenge either Cold War or nuclear orthodoxy: never to change the framework of global confrontation or reliance on nuclear threats, never to attempt Candor or New Thinking (except for JFK's American University speech: eroded weeks later by his statements in Berlin).

In response to Bundy's challenge to me --"But you never say that, Dan!" (that LBJ would probably not have carried out recommendations to use nuclear weapons at Khe Sanh)--I could say:

All presidents since Harry Truman have shown themselves, in crises, to be strongly reluctant actually to launch nuclear weapons: whatever they said in public. In several cases, at least, this may have amounted to a strong personal determination, a private commitment, never to initiate the use of nuclear weapons under any circumstances. This may have been true of JFK and LBJ (it was McNamara's recommendation, his own commitment, and his view of their attitudes). It might (or might not) have been true of Carter as well.

It almost surely was not true of Nixon or Eisenhower, and seems very unlikely for Reagan and Ford or Bush.

But even those with a private policy of "no first use" (if this was the case) confronted strong pressures within their own administrations, as well as outside, to be willing to use nuclear weapons first in combat "if necessary"--to prepare for this, to avoid ruling it out in principle or in practice, to announce this readiness in internal, classified policy statements--and to threaten their use, when threats were necessary in crises.

All our presidents, in fact, yielded to such pressures to make

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threats or preparations in crises, whether reluctantly or not. This included even those presidents determined not to carry out such threats--for whom, then, the threats constituted, in their minds, bluffs (in some cases intended to impress allies or domestic elements, including some in the US government, more than the adversaries). These same presidents were extremely reluctant to admit, to themselves or others, then or later, that they had made nuclear threats at all, as are subordinates like Bundy and McNamara; but they did.

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12 April 1989

Threats, Bluffs, Thresholds, and the Risk of Nuclear War

The "No Sweat" school of "critics" of the arms race who regard the actual risk of nuclear war, and thus the nuclear risks of our armaments and foreign policies, as being very low--McNamara, Bundy, York, (Zuckerman, Weisner?) and Blight (TCS?) --either ignore the relation of threats to the nuclear arms race and the possibility of war, or else operate with a very inadequate or invalid theory of threats.

Bundy's (quoting Schelling) notion of a "tradition of non-use" of nuclear weapons is simply wrong, denying the history of frequent use of nuclear weapons in threats. It obscures a major reason for having and "modernizing" a nuclear arsenal; a major element in international crises; and (I believe) a major condition of the risk of nuclear war.

McNamara's notion of the total "non-usability" of nuclear weapons ignores this historical record of use--as well as plausible reasoning that has led to these uses.

By ignoring the possible and the actual use of nuclear weapons in crises, Bundy and McNamara (like the public) detach (1) the nuclear arms race, and (2) US intervention policies and practices, covert and overt, from the risk of nuclear war. Whatever that risk--they see it as non-zero but very low, essentially constant or steadily decreasing (Bundy)--they regard it as unaffected by, independent of, both the evolution of nuclear weapons (though Bundy admits to me he has simply ignored "technological questions"--such as those that point toward LOW!) and interventions by both superpowers. In particular, they see close to zero chance of deliberate initiation of nuclear war by either side in such a conflict; and this is unaffected by weapons developments.

Bundy maintains this position even when he admits that threats have been made (in his book now) and that some presidents have regarded them as effective. He still argues that the threats were almost wholly bluffs, in every case (probably very influenced by his perception of his bosses, Kennedy and Johnson); he further doubts that they were effective, whatever, say, Eisenhower and Nixon may have believed; and (like McNamara) that they were bound to be ineffective, especially since parity: so obviously so that he tries to deny that Nixon or later presidents even made any threats or could have.

In other words, he persists in his argument of "The Unimpressive Record of Atomic Diplomacy," despite Nixon's assertions--which were apparently made to refute Bundy!--and despite recent scholarship which directly contradicts many of his

points in his book (e.g., concerning Truman, Korea, and the first Quemoy crisis: as well as the Nixon era.

Like the majority of the public, they do not see the arms race as posing significant risks, or increases in risk. Their objections to it are on grounds other than risk, primarily waste; and their opposition lacks a sense of urgency or high priority.

Likewise with respect to intervention. They remain uncritical of the past interventions in which they participated, and specifically deny that they had a potential or significant risk of nuclear escalation, hence that they pose any warning for the future. When past crises or wars are investigated today, they remain either silent (e.g., on Vietnam) or continue to propagate major falsehoods--e.g., on the Cuban Missile Crisis--except for new revelations that serve to reduce estimates of the likelihood of escalation and thus to be reassuring about the past (and future) potential of nuclear war.

In this sense, the effect of Blight's "lessons" on Cuba II--(a) that the crisis could easily have been avoided by correcting Soviet misperceptions--i.e., the US had not provoked a valid Soviet concern and response by the US covert policies toward Cuba, which persist--and that, (b) in any case, it was essentially without real risk, despite appearances and overt threats--are "dangerous," in MBG's characterization. They misdirect, mislead, and falsely reassure, short-circuiting both valid understanding, and urgent public concern and mobilization. I.e., they maintain or increase human, societal danger, and the difficulties of reducing it.

When I described the attitudes of certain unnamed critics of my own argument in my Research Prospectus in June, 1988, I had in mind, in particular, my discussions with Herb York. But the publication in the fall of 1988 of McGeorge Bundy's Danger and Survival put these attitudes into print as explicitly and elaborately as one could ask; a very large part of the book could almost be read as a detailed critique of my own positions and concerns. Although Bundy criticises and deprecates almost all of the pro-armaments premises and beliefs that led to increases in the stockpiles, the overall "Danger" of nuclear war in his title and discussion is low throughout the era and steadily decreasing in each decade.

In each case where newly-declassified documents reveal high-level discussions, often involving the president, of possible US initiation of nuclear warfare, along with military planning for their use and sometimes special deployments, he emphasizes not only the contingent nature of this planning but the lack of final decision or commitment by the president.

He leaps from the observation that such data, earlier concealed and denied or unimagined, do not prove or guarantee that the president would have actually decided to fire nuclear weapons under any of the circumstances discussed or others--which is true--to the tacit inference that the existence of such "contingency planning," discussions, contingent commitments and preparations had no bearing at all on the likelihood that nuclear weapons might actually be launched in some circumstances.

He points out, correctly, that there is a gap between what a president permits to be discussed and planned, what he even says he will do, and what he will actually do in the event. But he concludes, in effect, that the particular threshold between non-nuclear and nuclear weapons is one that no leader of the sort likely to come to power in the US or Soviet Union would ever cross, no matter what threats or commitments he might have made, no matter what pressures he might feel. (He does not quite say this, explicitly, but the implication seems clear).

From this point of view, data and speculation that appears to bear on the "closeness" of events and decisions to possible nuclear warfare is all beside the point and misleading. We have never been really close, there have been no near misses.

Is this wisdom, or is it reassuring obscurantism? It is hard to imagine evidence that Bundy would admit to be contradictory to his inferences, short of presidentially-ordered nuclear explosions.

At any rate, the questions remain important: under what circumstances might a president cross that threshold; what kinds of evidence might bear on that estimate; and what does available evidence of various sorts tend to suggest?

A new body of evidence, on President Kennedy's actual intentions during the Cuban Missile Crisis, bears on this question in a number of ways. On the one hand, it supports Bundy's point that a president can give every appearance of intending to carry out an attack--non-nuclear in this case--"if necessary," while privately considering and preparing to make major concessions--contrary to expressed commitments and ultimatums--rather than to launch such an attack, which he might even be determined to avoid under any circumstances. In other words, the ultimatum that Robert Kennedy carried to Ambassador Dobrynin on the night of October 27, 1962, may have been a bluff: to a degree unknown even to most members of the ExComm.

At the same time, there is strong reason to suspect that even if this were the case during the crisis and at its height, events might have swept the president, against his prior intent, into carrying out the attacks he had prepared and threatened. To

the president's own dismay, his threats might have turned out not to have been bluffs after all.

Indeed, his preparations may have been all too convincing to Castro, who apparently was convinced of imminent invasion and as a direct consequences ordered his antiaircraft to fire on US reconnaissance planes, ignoring the contrary pleas of the Soviet Ambassador. No one in the ExComm, apparently, entertained the possibility that Castro was out of Khrushchev's control. The shootdown of a U-2 by a Soviet SAM seemed to make it evident that Khrushchev himself had decided to fire at recon planes; again, no one imagined what was the reality, that this too had been without orders from Moscow and against Khrushchev's wishes.

Reflecting these two American misconceptions, RFK proceeded to give a warning to Dobrynin that another shootdown would lead to immediate attacks on the Soviet-manned SAMS and perhaps on the missiles. Nothing suggests that this particular ultimatum, against any further attacks on US recon, was a bluff at all. It might possibly not have been carried out if another plane had been shot--as Bundy points out, in the strictest sense no verbal commitment is or can be absolute--but in practice it was about as strong and likely to be implemented as a commitment ever gets.

(Explain)

RFK would almost certainly never have uttered a warning in these terms to the Soviets if he had imagined that Khrushchev might not--as in fact he did not--have the power to comply with it: that he had already lost control of Castro's antiaircraft fire.

If Khrushchev had delayed his decision to back down and remove the missiles for just a few more hours of bargaining over the terms, it would have been long enough for Castro to have shot down a low-level reconnaissance plane. Kennedy, surprised by this "Soviet defiance" of his warning, would probably have felt compelled to carry out attacks that would have killed sizeable numbers of Soviet troops, despite the risk, perhaps later realized, of still further escalation.

Thus threats, even intended as bluffs, can enlarge risks, causing responses and creating circumstances that can trigger other threats and turn bluffs into attacks. And this was not the only that way that what Kennedy may have intended as a bluff, raising plausible but "mistaken" fears of invasion, prolonged a crisis during which other events could have triggered, ultimately, an actual invasion, possibly followed by Soviets moves elsewhere that would presently have challenged US commitments to use tactical nuclear weapons "if necessary."

A strong argument can be made that Kennedy "might well" have found himself making non-nuclear attacks that were strongly contrary to his prior intention, expectation and desire: carrying

out threats that he had fully regarded, privately, as bluffs. Could not the same arise with US nuclear "bluffs"? Moreover, to say that Kennedy might, after all, have found himself attacking the Soviet missiles--following up or accompanying attacks on Soviet SAMS, attacks which had been triggered by the shootdown of American recon planes (perhaps by Cuban antiaircraft, which unknown to the Americans was firing against Khrushchev's wishes)--is to say that he might have ended up ordering attacks that he and McNamara believed had a significant probability of causing a low-level Soviet officer, under attack, to launch a nuclear-armed missile at a US city.

But this would be precisely the kind of nuclear risk-taking that Bundy generally suggests would be out of the question for an American president or secretary of defense. Contrary to Bundy, it does seem meaningful and correct to say that such risk-taking was very close, on the night of October 27, 1962 (since Khrushchev was hardly certain to act as he did during that night, and as quickly, to order the missiles dismantled at first light).

Moreover, since some such chain of events was implicit as a strong possibility from early on in the crisis--once the decision was made to blockade, fly low-level reconnaissance, and generally threaten invasion--the latter decision already implied a willingness to "risk eventually taking such a risk" of nuclear explosions and subsequent escalation.

Again, does not such demonstrated willingness to take what may have appeared a small risk of nuclear war in these particular circumstances suggest a possible willingness to launch one or more tactical nuclear weapons in other circumstances that might seem much more exigent?

Other evidence, historical and psychological, bears on related questions: What does it take to get a president to order or condone massacre; or, to gamble recklessly, risking various forms of catastrophe; or in general, to cross various thresholds of legality, or morality, or precedent, or risk: to move beyond traditional boundaries, to break through limits? What kinds of fears, in a handful of dust...to creat a wasteland?

[Betsy Tomlinson called me a few hours ago to confirm that Abby Hoffman was dead. "People have all kinds of decisions to make."]

*and can be got at
influential? What checks;
what
How much
do we rely on
Principles
inhibition?*

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Friday, 19 May, 1989
CII Story

[Why crisis; why "necessity" for military response; who made that finding; myth of consensus; Milgram effect; Milgram effect vs. Janis' "groupthink"; real motives of President.

Stimuli to Khrushchev decision: Berlin; German nucs; Gilpatric and K humiliation; Turkish missiles, operational in April contrary to myth; K fear of impending humiliation over Cuba, invasion; (Mongoose, invasion exercises, maneuvers, plans);

Real K strategy; possible backup plan: timing with respect to election to encourage JFK "cooperation"; fait accompli; miscalculation on how long JFK could sit on information (perhaps from U2: see JFK to N on secrecy, in Readers Digest N article); see McG estimate of secrecy period (why important? see below).

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March 7, 1990

(Imagine telling the story of the "Cuban Missile Crisis" as--in terms of my best current information and guesses--I now think it happened, without contrasting it with the orthodox account or arguing the evidence. The story would be almost entirely unfamiliar, not only to the public but to specialists, and not only in terms of motives but in terms of context, linkages, salient incidents, and in the roles, views, values and choices of participants.

It would be very hard to resist the temptation to complicate such a narrative by presenting alternative hypotheses at frequent points, or by differentiating between well-founded facts and speculative interpretations, or by citing or criticizing evidence, or by raising and knocking down the familiar accounts.

One way to proceed, with some self-discipline, would be to imagine first the briefest, then successively more elaborate answers to the questions: "What happened in the Cuban Missile Crisis? What were US and Soviet leaders trying to accomplish, what were their strategies and expectations, and how did the interactions of these come out?"

(From Cuba I and Berlin to Cuba II; from Cuba II to VN.)

Sov concerns; problems Sovs were trying to solve; US "provocations," challenges, triggering events. Cuba, Berlin, Turkey, arms race (Gilpatric, buildup, exposure of "gap", first-use threats and plans).

K's strategy, till Oct. 22; from Oct 22-27. Hopes, expectations. Validation of these in past experience and actual JFK preparations (not all known to K). Question: meaning of warnings on Berlin; aims with respect to Germany.

JFK's strategy prior to October 16. Mongoose; Turkey; reactions to

Sov buildup, including ISA analyses and PSALM restrictions, along with threats; October planning and preparations; de Soto, provocation plans.

JFK/McN strategy after about October 17, to
Oct. 27. Role of ExComm; bluff; terms; blockade; preps.

October 27: gambling, risk of loss of control. Castro's role.